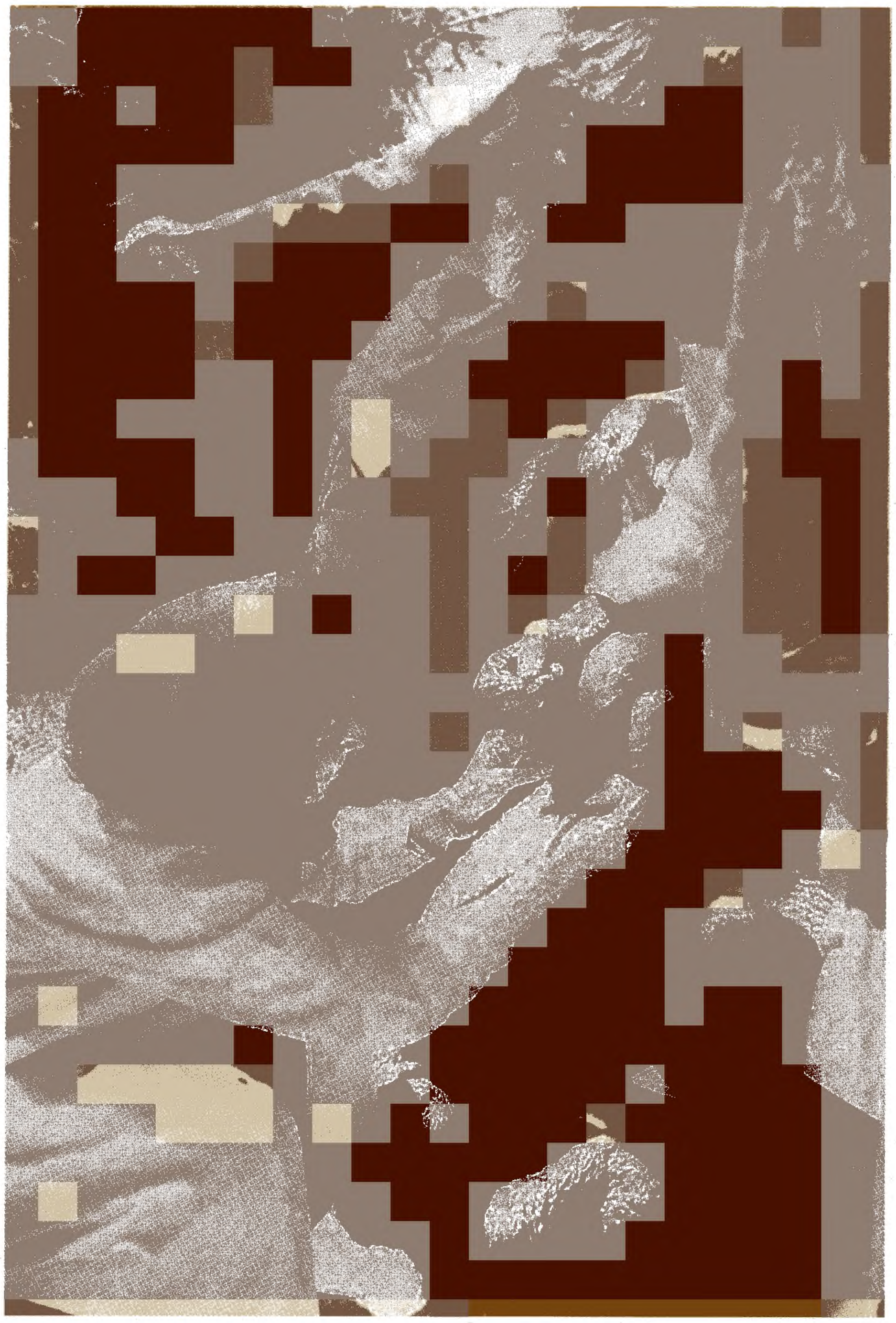


R. LeMyne, UNHCR

Male colleagues are not always supportive



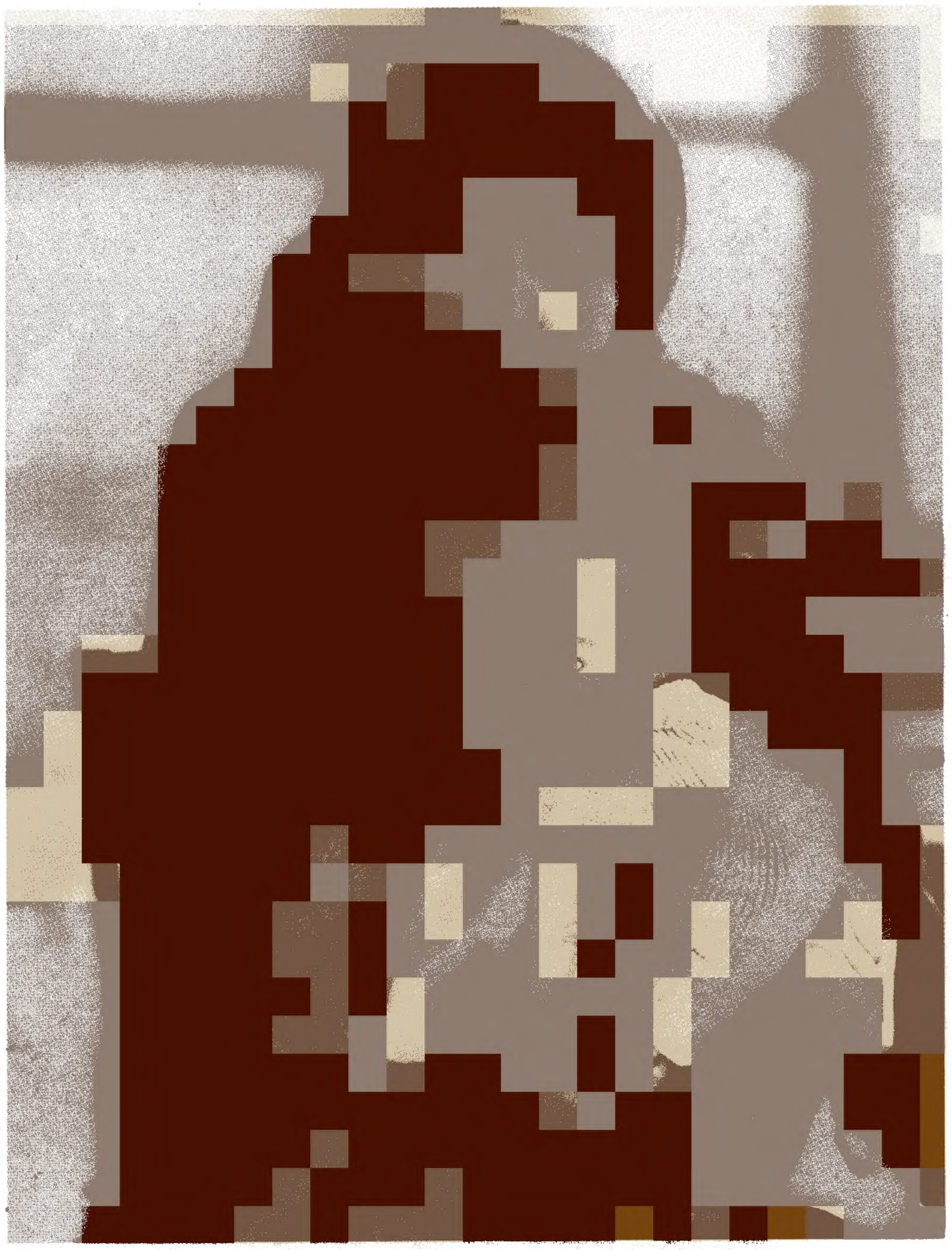
"The male employees were happy to see the back of us. They said men should work instead of women."

"I suspect that with male Afghan staff if they could find a way of continuing the work without Afghan women, they would just get on with it…Afghan men, young and old, don't really care if the women work or not. It's quite worrying."

"There are some conservative elements within some of our families and at work. Some men don't like to see us going to work but we ignore them."

"Kabul men don't care. After all these years of having Islamic groups ruling, they have become conservative."

Women agonise about losing their jobs



John Isaac, UNICEF

"Women are jealous of us because we are working. They watch us go out to work with envy in their eyes and we're scared about their ill will."

"We heard a rumour that the men would take over our jobs and we were upset. It's true there are many unemployed men."

"We were upset about the wording [of the decree], we were hopeless and upset and worried about how we could make ends meet. We were worried about our salaries, we were worried about our children and we were worried about the [people we help in] our programme."

"We are worried about the Taliban sending health staff home too."

"If the Taliban force agencies to employ their women then the agencies should pull out to defend our rights. Then men and women would be unemployed and we would really be equal!"

Children's education is a priority for all women

"Don't think about women and our rights. Think about our children, think about the fact that they don't know the difference between their right hand and their left hand."

"We feel pain for our children and for the future of our nation. Life goes on with the chadari and with hejab but not without education. Economics and education are the foundations of any country. We have brave women who will fight for their rights once the economic and education situation has been sorted out. Our people have been cowed."

"We want education to be available, like it was before but according to Islamic principles. Even if you just provide a room where kids can study."

"Our children know more about religion than we do and that's not a bad thing. They tell us about Islamic laws and ideas. They taught our kids at religious school to respect parents and to address us as 'shoma' [the equivalent of "vous" in French]. We were schooled during the Communist period and we were never taught to be polite to our parents."

"Even boys are suffering from education problems. In the boys school, the boys come in and tumble all over each other. No one listens to the teacher. He reads the register and then at 10.30 he says, 'Well, boys I have to go and push my cart in Deh Afghanan, so go home,' and that's because no one can pay his salary."

"Women's rights come out of girls' schools even if girls are taught religious subjects, according to the Taliban's rules and regulations. We are not afraid of the burqa and until society is ready for women to be uncovered, we will wear it. Our children's rights and education should be taken into consideration."



Rupert Colville, UNHCR

Loss of work for women is a family issue

""People do not live as individuals in Afghan society. People live and react to the outside world from within the family."

"Since the men have lost their jobs and are sitting at home, it's become hopeless and they nag about everything and find fault with everything we do. Men see it as an insult that women go out and work and they do not. My husband controls my salary and if I try to struggle with him, he will stop me going to work."



John Isaac, UNICEF

Most--but not all--think that aid agencies should stay, no matter what

"If agencies pull out it won't hurt the Talibs. Poor people need the UN and NGOs. There is a drought. Pulling out will hurt people. The Taliban have said on the radio many times: 'God will help. We don't need the NGOs.' The agencies should keep their relations with the Taliban and try to help people. Look at the UN sanctions and their effect. They just hit the people. The best medicines used to be flown in from India. The results of laboratory tests were flown in and patients could be cured more easily. The sanctions hit the people. Don't cut the help--it won't bother the government."

"The widows would be in an even worse situation than we are. We have our husbands at least. They do not even have that. We are happy to leave our houses and to work. We are happy to help the widows."

"Agencies shouldn't pull out. The Taliban will win and poor people will die. The UN is an organisation that is supposed to work for the people, not for the Taliban. They should continue. Agencies pulling out would affect the people much more than it would affect the Taliban.



John Isaac, UNICEF



"We love wearing the burqa. Even if the Taliban leave, I will wear the burqa because I am covered and I have more freedom now. Before, I had to wear modern clothes to be accepted. I was always worrying about my legs or my arms. Men were always leering. We just want education and work. We want the same conditions as in Saudi Arabia at least. The burqa does not kill us. Why spend so much time and effort trying to eliminate it? Why do women in the West spend so much time worrying about superficialities?"

"The women in New York don't care about Afghan women's rights. Can they come here and burn in the fires of hell like us? They have found the way out. Women in Pakistan don't care about us either."

"Women abroad should come here and fight. There are few educated women left in Kabul. Rural people have come to live in Kabul."

"Let's have action and not words. Come here and talk face to face with the Taliban."



A. Diamond, UNHCR

"In Kabul around 50% of the people are somehow making ends meet. The foreign agencies are helping another 15% perhaps. Without assistance from outside those 15% would surely suffer and die and 15% is better than nothing. The aid agencies are not working for the Taliban and for the governments abroad. They are working for the Afghan people and must find ways to stay."

"If the agencies pull out, the people who will suffer the most are the women but the Taliban don't care. It is all about politics. If the economic situation deteriorates, then the Afghani will go down and the Taliban may suffer."

"The Taliban would be happy if agencies pull out. This small thing we have with women here would be finished. The Taliban do not care about the people. Do not pull your agencies out. Bring more agencies in. We may get so desperate that we may kill ourselves. People from Muslim countries should come and put pressure on them."

"The international community should cut all their help, especially to the Taliban. All projects in Kandahar should be shut down. All help should be pulled out. The people will suffer and the government should suffer. There is a drought this year so international organisations should stop their work."



children partake of this daily struggle, sometimes with the help of the international aid community, sometimes with what meagre resources they have left. Taliban authorities continue to issue decrees, which often target and restrict women in order to preserve "tradition" and "morality." Women must not appear in public without hejab (head scarf) and burqa (full covering). Women are banned from working in all but a limited number of fields, and schools for girls have been closed.

RECENT DECREES FURTHER LIMIT WOMEN'S OPPORTUNITIES

Decree number 8, issued in July 2000, restricted women's employment in non-governmental organisations as well as in United Nations agencies, except in activities related to health. This decree has taken away opportunities for a number of professional women who were engaged in UN and NGO work to feed their families, to give their lives a semblance of normalcy and to try to serve various sectors of the Afghan population that only women can reach. Those professional women working in health care--doctors and nurses--will continue to use limited resources to tackle enormous problems within their country, their communities, and their homes.

In the fall of 2000, representatives of the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children met with women in Kabul and interviewed them about the impact of decree number 8. This group of women was composed of women professionals, educated women who had spent most of their lives working in Kabul for ministries, non-governmental organisations or other aid agencies. As such, it is not a scientific, statistical survey. However, the interviews do reveal a wide diversity of opinion on the decree, on life in Afghanistan and its future path, and on the role of the international community.

One of the women asked why the assistance community did not take women's voices abroad. This publication attempts to do just that-- in all parts of the world where there is a concern for the rights of women and girls.

We are pleased to add this publication, bearing the words of a group of professional women in Kabul who continue to struggle and to survive, to other recent publications focusing on Afghan women.

Sippi Azerbaijani-Moghadam
Technical Advisor for Afghanistan
Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children
22.10.2000

This document was prepared with the support of the Office of the UN Co-ordinator for Afghanistan. It does not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations system in Afghanistan.

Warring parties have not respected women's rights

"Women's rights were destroyed by Massoud, the Hazaras and Hekmatyar. We saw girls abducted from bus stops by soldiers and we knew what would happen to women we saw being dragged into houses. Why does the United Nations recognise them?"

"Under the Communists education was superficial and women's rights were trampled under foot. Why did the UN accept the Communists who destroyed the foundation of Afghanistan?"

"Under the Taliban, in the current situation, men and women's rights have been trampled under foot."

"Men's rights are also under attack. They have to wear beards and clean looking men are targeted for attack."

"They have trampled women's rights but we don't want it to be the way it was before anyway."





Jan Dago

Work enhances women's self-esteem

"We really need a salary. Our salary give us rights within the family."

"We had to prove to the Taliban and to the men that women can do a distribution. Before, men used to do the distribution and the men tried to convince [the boss] that women could not do a distribution. Not only can we do a distribution but also we can do it better than men can because we are more sensitive to the women's needs and they have someone they can tell their problems to. Women are more sympathetic to each other's needs."

"It has been a good example for the Taliban that we women are capable and we are doing everything within the boundaries of Islam."

"We support lots of women through our work and train women to carry out volunteer work in health and land mines. Spiritually the decree dealt us a big blow. Now we can't work in the community or train people or supervise them."



John Isaac, UNICEF



Jürgen Hein,dpa

Family and cultural values also impede women in claiming their rights

"The situation is not good for talking about women's rights. Our family and cultural structures do not support equal rights for men and women."

"There are no rights for women in Afghanistan. I have had gender awareness training, I am a doctor, and I cannot implement anything within my own home. I'm Pushtun and my family is traditional."

"We know our rights but we can't take them. I get involved in family arguments to protect the other women from men but those women do not say anything to back me up. They just look. My mother asks me why I involve myself in someone else's fight but I can't stand by and watch."

"We've had gender awareness training but we can't even implement it with our own children."

"What good does it do me to walk around bare faced? We are from around Kabul and we never had freedom to dress as we wanted and go where we wanted. We cannot accept that freedom anyway. My mother always wore a burqa."

"The current situation has spoilt men's mentalities. When my sister sticks her head out of the door of the house, my brother tells her off. In our house, we cannot pick up the telephone when it rings. They tell us a man should pick it up first. If there are no men at home we don't answer the phone."

"The Taliban don't let women go to ziyarat [pilgrimage] anymore. We are worrying about them limiting the number of days that women can go out of their houses."



Jeremy Hartley, UNICEF

When men are unemployed, women work to feed their families

"Many men are unemployed. Men are holding down several jobs if they can find them now. It is difficult for men to be at home. There is a lot of fighting at home. Our men were more upset than we were when we were told to stay at home."

"Livelihood and equal rights to work are equally important but the livelihood issue is more important because so many men are now unemployed."

"This is our only chance to work and to support the family."

"We need to work for money. Otherwise, we would stay at home. Why should we take risks if we're not being paid for it?"

"My husband is an engineer and unemployed. We have four children. If I would be unemployed too then the situation would be very bad. Work and having equal right to work are important for us but the wages are more important. Our husbands are not working."



John Isaac, UNICEF

Women strive for creative ways to work in a restrictive environment

"We work with rules and follow them."

"We have all been obeying the Sharia law to the letter..."

"I believe it is important that women work and work according to what is written in the Quran. I have been wearing a burqa and I have been engaged in religious teachings with my other sisters here since Communist times. Nothing much has changed except that the controls are now tighter about wearing a burqa and women's mobility."

"Women sit right at the back of buses. When the bus comes, men push to the front and take all the seats so sometimes there are no seats for women. Women cannot take taxis alone. 2 or 3 women have to be in the taxi- - otherwise it'll be stopped and the taxi driver might be forced to get engaged to the passenger."

"Shopkeepers are frightened to serve us in case there are Taliban around. They panic and beg us to go away and leave them alone."

"We're worried, especially when we're alone and especially when passing Vice and Virtue vehicles. Vice and Virtue are very active in the evenings, towards prayer time so that's the time when we don't move."

"I am disabled. I lost one arm and one leg during the war. I cannot wear a burqa so the Talibs sometimes whip me. I cry out that I am disabled and they shout "So what, it's your problem."

"We used to travel [for our work] in the organisation's flying coach but now we don't go out and about much. We have meetings at home. We sometimes move around by taxi, in groups and one of us catches the bus."

"They found us a car without insignia so that we could start travelling to work again."

"We travel by taxi and we don't say we work for an NGO. We have been using taxis for three years now."

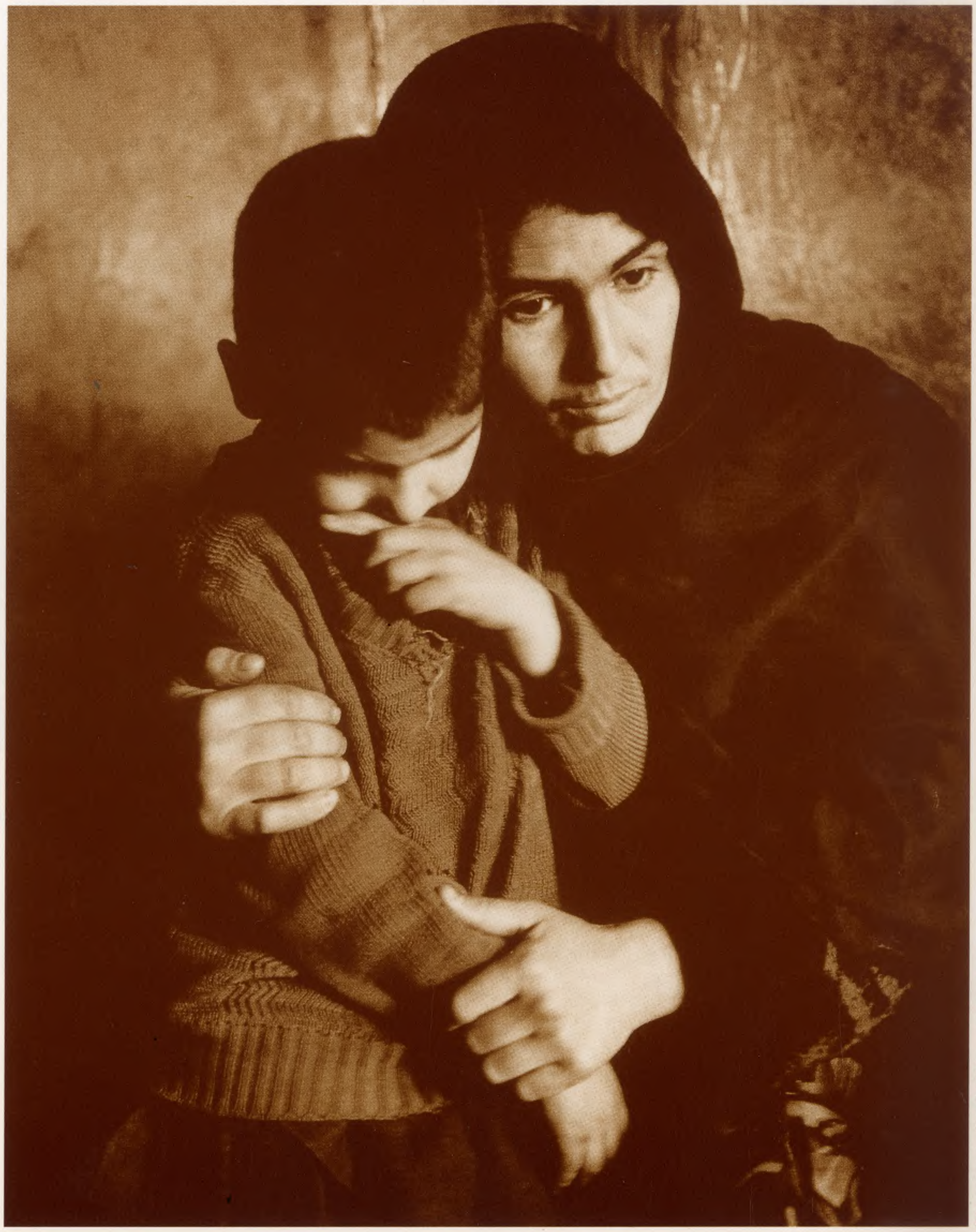
"Women shouldn't travel with mahrams (male family member acting as a chaperone). It is unnecessary and the organisations do not pay for the mahram. He could be doing something else and earning money in that time."

Women are anxious about working under the current circumstances

"We take a big risk when we go out to work but we take this risk because we're getting paid for it. We are afraid. When the Taliban stop cars at check points and start searching them we get scared."

"When we have written permission to work we are not that worried but sometimes even with written permission we worry."

"We are a little worried about security issues. We try very hard to obey all the rules."



Rupert Colville, UNHCR

Women see their education as a passport to work

"We felt that if we could no longer work then all our studies would be wasted. The world is advancing and we are slowly sinking into nothingness. Our families are educated and enlightened so they would be upset that our education would be wasted by not working."

"Working women are often very educated. When we heard about the decree we thought that 22 years of education and work experience would be washed down the drain. Women who are educated want to work."

Take Our Words Abroad



Take Our Words Abroad

Men and women in Afghanistan awake every day wondering whether there will be enough food to feed their families and go to sleep thanking God that they and their children have survived another day. In a war-shattered economy, families look for work that will give them some income or allow them to secure food at the end of the day.

In Herat and Mazar untold numbers of women toil over carpet looms. Women in Laghman and Nuristan chop wood and climb hills with sixty kilogram loads. In Hazarajat women take dwindling numbers of livestock to summer pasture. In Kandahar and Badakhshan they harvest wheat or opium. Kochi women lead flocks in search of water.

Women all over Afghanistan fetch water for hours on end ... and all women handle the daily work of cooking, cleaning and caring for children, as they have for thousands of years. Untold numbers of women bear children, die in childbirth, or watch their children die because of poverty and profound underdevelopment and the accumulated destruction of more than two decades of war.

A small number of professional women have continued to work in Afghanistan. Although most women are forbidden from working, female doctors and nurses have been permitted to work, caring for women and girl patients.

TWO DECADES OF CONFLICT IN AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan has been in a state of conflict since 1979 when the Soviet Union invaded. After fighting the Mujahideen for a decade, the Soviets withdrew, and internecine warfare broke out among various factions. In the mid-1990s, the Taliban entered the scene and captured the capital, Kabul, in 1996. The Taliban now control most of the country.

Over the past twenty years, women and children have fled to refugee camps when they lost their homes and families. They have sought safety in cellars to avoid bombardment. Many have been buried as victims of the war. The silent suffering of millions of women and children beset by landmines, rockets, looting, rape, massacre, murder, and fighting has for the most part gone unreported. Their daily struggle to deal with loss of relatives, loss of limbs, loss of status, life in a new environment, poverty and loss of freedom, has gone largely unrecorded.

During the early years of the war, women continued to work, whether in fields or in hospitals, to tend to the needs of their families, to uphold their culture, to nurse the sick and wounded. The international aid community did what it could in terms of material aid but was unable or unwilling to address the well-known and entrenched pattern of human rights violations.

As Afghanistan--beset by conflict, earthquakes, floods and now drought--continues its descent into an abyss of crippling poverty, families still try to find some sort of "normal" life among the ruins. Men, women, and